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Who killed Marthe Bonnard? Madness, morbidity and Pierre Bonnard's 'The Bath'

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Abstract:

There is an ongoing revaluation of Pierre Bonnard, beginning with a retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1984 and witnessed most recently in 'Pierre Bonnard; Painting Arcadia' at the Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco 2016. The resulting body of literature, from reviews to catalogue essays, operates to subsume Bonnard within the modernist canon. However the gender ambiguities in Bonnard's practice problematize these attempts to read his paintings using modernist tropes. In particular, his depiction of his wife Marthe de Méigny in the bathtub does not fit easily within the genre of 'the bather'. Across the literature there has been the occultation of a specific woman (Marthe), replacing her with the Ophelia stereotype through an extension of Toril Moi's 'death dealing' binarism. As a consequence of reiterated speculation regarding Marthe's mental health she continues to be characterised as the neurotic woman disintegrating in the bath/sarcophagus. This article argues that the literature creates a deathly and deadly porous woman. Reviewing the weight of gendered metaphoric language the article will offer a reading of the bath series and Bonnard's late interiors based on the recognition of his difference – a difference which ruptures genre.

Keywords:

Pierre Bonnard

painting

modernism

bath

domestic

Ophelia

Biography:

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Article:

The mythology of Marthe and her reclusive life with Bonnard has kept us from seeing Bonnard's work as Bonnard wanted us to see it – with our own eyes, with our own experience. (Burnham 2009: 70)

The domestic, perpetually invoked in order to be denied, remains throughout the course of modernism a crucial site of anxiety and subversion. (Reed 1996: 64)

The repositioning of Pierre Bonnard within the modernist canon is an ongoing project, beginning with a retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1984 and witnessed most recently with the major exhibition 'Pierre Bonnard; Painting Arcadia' at the Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco 2016. Across the years of revaluation academics and reviewers have particularly focused on Bonnard's late interiors and bath series, reading them through the lens of biographical narrative to present an increasingly complex visual practice. Central to the narrative process is the figure of Marthe de Méligny. Born in 1869, Marthe's real name was Maria Boursin. She was a shop girl in Paris when she began a relationship with Bonnard in 1893. They were married in 1925 and, until her death in 1942, Marthe's figure recurs within Bonnard's work to an extent which is remarkable in modern painting. He portrays her repeatedly throughout their partnership of 49 years in all manner of domestic activities – eating breakfast, feeding the dog, bathing. It might be argued that Bonnard has been marginalised within modernist history because his art is so focused on this interior world. However, Bonnard retrospectives across the last three decades have recalibrated the reading

of that world in what might be regarded as an exercise in spin doctoring. There is now a body of literature which sensationalises the Pierre/Marthe partnership, Bonnard's late interiors and his bath series. The speculation focuses on Bonnard's alleged affair with Renée Monchaty. Following his marriage to Marthe, Monchaty committed suicide. The accepted Bonnard narrative is that he was full of guilt for Monchaty's death while Marthe became increasingly paranoid, bathing obsessively and effectively imprisoning Bonnard in their home. This drama is so seductive that it is repeated across the Bonnard literature, resulting in the 'mythology of Marthe'. Bonnard is depicted as a misunderstood modernist antihero; Marthe is the sickly neurotic who stymied his life and work. However, the mythology is arguably the response of a modernism which considers it unnatural for a male artist to focus his practice upon the domestic interior and one particular woman. Bonnard is more easily written into the canon through the production of gendered stereotypes which replace Marthe's specificity with a sequence of fictional roles – the jealous wife, the mad woman, a drowned Ophelia. This article will review the existing literature to reveal how entrenched the mythology has become. It will argue for its removal to reveal Bonnard's difference, that is, his naturalisation of the domestic site for the modern male artist and his figuration of a femininity situated beyond male sexual desire.

Early Criticism

From his earliest reviews Bonnard held a tenuous position within modernism. The critical response to his 'art of the everyday' is apparent in the catalogue for the first Bonnard retrospective held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1948, the year after he died. Therein John Rewald notes, 'If there exists such a thing as the exquisiteness of banality that was exactly what Bonnard discovered (Rewald 1948: 25)'. For much of the twentieth century Bonnard was misunderstood. At best he was considered an uncomplicated Impressionist painter with a 'happy imagination and innate lyricism (Rewald 1948: 56)', alleged qualities which kept him on the periphery of modernism's carefully regulated borders. In his early career, he was briefly associated with the avant-garde through his involvement with Les Nabis, a group of painters which included Edouard Vuillard and Maurice Denis. Like them, he was influenced by Symbolism and Japanese prints. He borrowed from the classical for his mid-period figurative works and utilised Arcadian imagery in his landscapes. In these ways Bonnard was self-consciously modern, however his work was never in step with major European art movements. From 1926 he increasingly dedicated his practice to the interiors

and gardens of his villa at Le Cannet. The critical response to this inward looking practice was largely ambivalent. Jack Flam notes

His painting (was) seen as anachronistic – a blend of Impressionist brushwork and bland domestic subjects that seemed to reflect a quaint and compromised modernism outside the significant developments in the history of modern art. (Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco 2009: 48)

Many of Bonnard's late works were not available for exhibition until the 1960s as they were held intestate. Following their release Bonnard's art was increasingly dramatized in the latter half of the twentieth century through the insertion of biographical speculation. For instance, Nicholas Watkins describes him as a man 'trapped within the atmosphere of a largely female domain. It was a place of both refuge and confinement (...) Bonnard was drawn to the windows, only to encounter the flattened presence of Marthe, his muse and gaoler (Watkins 1994:167)'. This characterisation became entrenched across the critical responses to the 'Bonnard' retrospective at the Tate Gallery, London in 1998. Consider the similar use of language across the following reviews:

Bonnard devoted his mature art to (Marthe's) lazy, glistening, depressed presence. The late Twentieth century likes its weirdos. Marthe has done more than anyone to focus cheap attention on Bonnard. (Januszczak 1998)

It must have been miserable, or miserably unequal, a sorry sort of shut-away mutual bondage, with her (on some accounts, basically a nutcase) wholly dependent on him, and him a dubious martyr, needing and nursing and using her dependence. (Lubbock 1998)

At times, the world of Bonnard's painting seems bounded by the bath and the kitchen table (...) This show is an overdose (...) It feels like a dead world, given a life by Bonnard the painter so much missed by Bonnard the man. (Searle 1998)

In the catalogue for the 2016 exhibition in San Francisco Bonnard's late interiors continue to be read as an unnatural or unhappy subject for a modern painter. Nicholas-Henri Zmelty describes how '(Marthe's) presence acts as an enclosure keeping Bonnard apart from the world (Zmelty 2016: 58)'. Philippe Comar states that

Loving a wallpaper pattern, the shadow of a shutter at the siesta hour, a cat's blurred outline, the body of a nude woman going about her household chores, means that one has given up many dreams, lost many illusions. (Comar 2016: 145)

This reading of Bonnard's domestic scenes may be regarded as an anachronistic extension of modernism's phobic response to the domestic space in the 19th century. At that time

The new category of 'public man'...was constructed via a series of oppositions to 'femininity' which mobilized older conceptions of domesticity and women's place (leading to) the separation of spheres between the masculine realm of public activity and the feminine realm of the home. (Eley 1992: 297)

The gendering of space in social modernity informed the geography of aesthetic modernism. Charles Baudelaire idealized the artist as a 'flâneur', a bourgeois conceptualisation of masculine creativity free to wander the metropolis looking for inspiration and pleasure. The domestic space was separated from these modernist pursuits. Travel became important for late nineteenth century avant-gardism as 'the act of going away, of seeking out (Fracina, Harrison & Perry 1993: 8)' and necessary for the collection of exotic stimuli, markers of colonial modernism. However Bonnard's art does not bare any such traces. Although he did make many trips abroad, Watkins states that 'Bonnard's journeys pose a fascinating problem (Watkins 1994: 62)'. The 'problem' in canonical terms is that Bonnard's art reflected the geography of his local environment throughout his career, with a particular emphasis upon home life.

From his early beginnings with Les Nabis Bonnard was interested in interiors populated by the female members of his family. Such 'intimiste' themes meant that Les Nabis were never fully embraced critically. Impressionism seemed to lend the domestic space a qualified legitimacy. Griselda Pollock suggests that this limited tolerance was superficially beneficial for artists such as Berthe Morisot or Mary Cassatt. However, their work was ultimately viewed as 'too cosy, too familiar, too mundane, too much part of the private, domestic, feminine sphere (...) how can (they) compete with the canonized icons of European Modernism (Pollock 2001: 235)'. The same might be said of Bonnard's interiors. A painting of a domestic scene was expected to conform to gender stereotypes where the preferred viewpoint upon the space was that of the patriarch. Linda Docherty notes that commercial success was dependent upon the fantasy of carefully calibrated family scenes: 'the male painter had to lower barricades between his studio space and the domestic sphere without

being subsumed by it either personally or artistically (Docherty 1996: 50)'. Docherty goes on to state that 'the successful painter of domesticated studio pictures was the man who kept women under his control (Docherty 1996: 64)'. In Bonnard's interiors he does not set out to order the space nor Marthe's presence within it. There is a sense of collapsing perspectives in his compositions; forms dissolve and resolve including the frequently blurred figure of Marthe. At times her presence is almost indecipherable from the objects on a table or the pattern of a rug. Consequently in the existing literature she is described as inaccessible, unreadable. The 'mythology of Marthe' operates as a means of reading the unreadable while effectively blaming her for stultifying Bonnard's modernism. Marthe is perceived as a dead weight in Bonnard's art and this metaphor is made literal in the morbid interpretation of his bathroom series.

Killing Marthe Bonnard



Figure 1: Pierre Bonnard The Bath (1925) 860 x 1206 mm, Oil paint on canvas, Tate Gallery, copyright estate of Pierre Bonnard

Within feminist theory, the binary approach to gender is itself described by Toril Moi as 'death-dealing (Moi 1997: 110)'. The argument is that the list of binary oppositions

beginning with the juxtaposition man/woman equates the feminine with passivity and, ultimately, death. The first time Marthe Bonnard is presented to the reader as a dead body is in 1994 when Nicholas Watkins interprets her figure in *'The Bath'* (1925) as 'a corpse in the stillness of a watery grave, a modern Ophelia of the bathroom whose life blood has drained away, leaving a crimson stain below the outside of the rim (Watkins, 1994: 186)'. Such analogies are reiterated in the catalogue accompanying the 1998 Tate retrospective. Sarah Whitfield focuses on the same painting describing 'the similarity between the shape of a sarcophagus and the shape of a bathtub (Whitfield, 1998: 28)'. Subsequent reviewers repeat the Watkins/Whitfield metaphors and *'The Bath'* becomes paradigmatic of the death narrative imposed upon Bonnard's series as a whole where 'Marthe lies in the bath like a corpse, a mummy in a sarcophagus (Graham-Dixon 1998)'. The language recurs again in the catalogue for the 2016 exhibition 'Pierre Bonnard; Painting Arcadia' where Marthe's 'bloodless body (is) laid out in a sarcophagus (Hahnloser-Ingold 2016: 283)' as she floats in a 'macabre and liquid langour (Zmelty 2016: 28)'.

Through this consistent, unquestioning recycling of language the living body of Marthe is slowly erased to be replaced with a mute image of feminized passivity and morbidity. Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb return to the death narrative without examining its gendering effects. Nochlin describes the bath series as 'exquisite rot, canvases shimmering with the iridescence of putrefaction... the ooze of the informe (Nochlin 1998: 30)'. Tamar Garb refers again to *'The Bath'* where 'the model seems already dead; her pale, cadaverous figure subsumed into the blue tones of the water (Garb 1998: 35)'. This is the occultation of Marthe in favour of a deathly/deadly woman – a toxic negation of masculine virility further contaminating the emasculating space of the home. Elizabeth Bronfen describes this dangerous position thus:

Placed beyond the register of images that the living body can know, 'Death' can only be read as a trope, as a signifier with an incessantly receding, ungraspable signified, invariably always pointing back self-reflexively to other signifiers. (Bronfen 1992: 52)

Across the Bonnard literature the writers are unable to read Marthe within the fixed parameters of the bathing genre and so they strip her of corporeal integrity and place her beyond signification.



Figure 2: Edgar Degas *Woman in a tub* *Femme au tub* (1883), Pastel on paper, 700 x 700 mm, Tate Gallery

Edgar Degas' charcoal and pastel study, *Woman in a Tub* c.1883 is situated firmly within the parameters of the genre. Degas made many hundreds of studies of the single, washing woman and it is alleged that the models were prostitutes from the brothels he frequented for the purpose of procuring sitters. In Degas' work the power dynamics of class and sexuality order the relationship; the woman is subject to the financial exchange between artist and model and the sexual exchange between viewer and objectified female. Griselda Pollock indicts Degas for what she describes as his

obsessive, repetitious re-enactments of sadistic voyeurism narrativised in bathing scenes, with its fetishism of its own means of aesthetic production and transformation

of the model's body, which in social exchange he debased and abused...and which in aesthetic practice he punished and tortured. (Pollock 1992: 33)

This critique is representative of a feminist reading of Degas' work in particular and the genre in general. Anthea Callen (1992) notes that the bathing female is a signifier of depravity and impurity within the canon. The immersion of the body in water was considered wanton in its physical abandonment to intimacy, with water symbolising the need for the woman to clean her impure body. Callen argues that this reference to dirt and hygiene is particularly salient in Degas' use of prostitutes as models. In this way, Callen traces the development of the genre from the classical iconography of the birth of Venus through to the innominate bather, signifier of carnal pleasure and its corollary, punishment.

Linda Nochlin seems to implicitly reference that history when she summarizes Bonnard's bath series:

there is something abject and sinister about Bonnard's late bathers...Of course the associations of sensual indulgence and subsequent punishment cling to such images, but that's obvious. What is perhaps less obvious is ... the melt-down demanded by (Bonnard's) sexual fantasy. (Nochlin 1998: 23)

There are obvious parallels between Nochlin's choice of language and Callen's description of Degas' gendered practice. However it is Nochlin's reading that sexualises Marthe's body and makes it dirty, deserving of punishment. The supposition is that because Bonnard is male, his depiction must be motivated by sexual desire. I would suggest that a formal reading of the painting's unusual composition removes it from the masochistic inferences of the genre.

Bonnard orders the compositional space into four horizontal bands. His careful articulation of the painting's internal rhythm means that Marthe's body is not the locus of interest. She is an integral component within the overall balance of the composition. Within this unification of form and colour, her body might almost be described as abstract – certainly in terms of the flesh tones. This is not a gratuitous display of female flesh. Marthe's limbs are flattened and elongated as her figure is integrated within the formal structure of the composition to become a fantastical band of painted space within the whole. On close inspection, the outline of her shape seems hesitant and vague. Bonnard seems to have retraced her form many times in thin washes of oil paint. This exacting process eventually results in the dissolution of physicality and its effects may be seen throughout Bonnard's oeuvre from still life to landscape. It is interesting to note that Bonnard preferred to work from memory rather than observation. The

tenuous nature of Marthe's painted body is arguably the result of this process of recollection in the studio. It is possible that *The Bath* is just one iteration of a particular event revisited in Bonnard's mind across many years and many compositions. This might explain why she does not seem to age across the series.

Marthe's apparent transmutation from the physical to something 'more than' might explain the reaction of the male writers. They do not read her form as a vehicle for heterosexual desire; instead they react to 'The Bath' with ambivalence. Waldemar Januszczak (1998) characterises her as a 'lazy, glistening, depressed presence', while Adrian Searle dismisses Marthe in the following way:

She bathes continuously. Bathing and moping, indeed, seems to be what she does best (...) bathed in spectral light, she appears indifferent to everything.' (Searle 1998)

Timothy Hyman describes her physical form thus

Certainly there is something disagreeable about (Marthe's) purplish mottled head, so oddly separate from the underwater body. (Hyman 1998 p. 131)

In the book 'Sexuality in the Field of Vision' (1986) Jacqueline Rose considers a moment in Sigmund Freud's work 'Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood'. In a footnote to Freud's remarks upon a confusing drawing of heterosexual copulation attributed to Da Vinci, Freud suggests that the artist has failed. As Rose describes it:

(Freud) relates – quite explicitly – a failure to depict the sexual act to bisexuality and to a problem of representational space... A confusion at the level of sexuality brings with it a disturbance of the visual field. (Rose 1986: 226)

Rose herself describes the Da Vinci sketch as 'inaccurate, uncomfortable, undesirable and without desire (Rose 1986: 225)'. This may be paralleled with Adrian Searle's expression of unease in front of *The Bath* and 'all that skin, skin dabbed at, poked and prodded at, rubbed-out and repainted (Searle 1998)'. Richard Dorment describes the representation of the bathing Marthe as the chronicle of 'a husband's loss of desire for his wife...The mystery on which allure depends is gone (Dorment 1998)'. Julian Barnes generalises the bathroom series as 'the non-erotic later nakedness of Marthe (Barnes 1998: 14)'.

It seems that the male critics are experiencing some sort of confusion and discomfort when they are presented with an image of a woman made by a man that is arguably not motivated by desire. To paraphrase Rose, this is their critical confusion at the level of sexuality – they do not desire Marthe; they suspect that Bonnard does not desire Marthe; the inference is that Bonnard's painting fails as an art work – it is a disturbance of the visual field.

Rose suggests that such an art work is able 'to expose the fixed nature of sexual identity as a fantasy (...) sexuality lies less in the content of what is seen than in the subjectivity of the viewer. (Rose 1986: 227'. The reaction of the male critics to the figure of Marthe reveals something about the ordering of their subjectivity as it impacts upon what they expect from the visual field. Their discomfort implicitly draws upon classical conventions associated with the female nude. Lynda Nead explains how these conventions have:

worked metaphorically to shore up the female body – to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the space of the other. (Nead 1992: 6)

Bonnard's fractured, blurred line breaks with the classical emphasis on wholeness and unity. Consequently the Bonnard literature reacts with deep unease when confronted with Marthe as a porous woman. Julia Kristeva explains how this supposition of a provisional state of being can pose a threat or indeed repel the viewer. Her theory of abjection derives from 'the disgusted fascination with products expelled from the body, which mark the boundaries of the body and the subject (Cranny-Francis 2003: 65).' Marthe's fluidity of form mirrors the overall mutability inherent in Bonnard's practice. When the Bonnard literature cannot accommodate the dissolving borders of Marthe's body, her disturbing permeability is reconstituted as a reassuring solid body in a fiction of death.

The Ophelia Problem

In this fiction Marthe is cast in the role of Ophelia. Watkins is the first writer to describe her as a 'modern Ophelia of the bathroom (Watkins 1994: 186)'. The characterisation is reaffirmed in critical responses to the Tate retrospective in 1998. Nochlin states that 'in the case of the outstretched female bather (...) it is hard to avoid the association with sensual enjoyment and its eventual punishment (...) it is Ophelia that one thinks of as a general precedent (Nochlin 1998: 29)'. Garb describes Marthe as 'more Ophelia than Venus' (Garb 1998: 36). The image reappears in the catalogue for 'Pierre Bonnard; the late still lifes and interiors' held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 2009, 'There is a sense of

immanent metamorphosis (...) or, more darkly, the drowning of Ophelia (Munck 2009: 65)'. The inference is repeated in 2016 when *The Bath* is described as 'a scene of a drowning – beginning with the painter's (Comar 2016: 145)'.



Figure 3: Sir John Everett Millais *Ophelia* (1851–2) Oil paint on canvas, 762 x 1118 mm, Tate Gallery

There are gender complications attached to this reductive reading. The Ophelia figure was a prevalent literary image for artists from the mid nineteenth century onwards. Sir John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852) is perhaps the most famous example. Others include Eugene Delacroix's *La Mort d'Ophélie* (c.1844), John William Waterhouse's *Ophelia* (1889) and Odilon Redon's *Ophelia* (1908). Such works traditionally drew upon Romanticised notions of female sexuality, madness and death. In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* Ophelia's drowning is second-hand information, framed as aesthetic spectacle. His use of this ekphrastic device removes Ophelia from the text at the time of her death. Ironically however, it is precisely this death – hidden and aestheticised - which defines Ophelia as an image. Elaine Showalter (1990) describes how Ophelia's character effectively becomes a ghost which haunts the play's main themes of loss and melancholia, but who is deprived of any authentic existence herself. There are parallels here for Marthe. Consider Martha Ronk's description of Ophelia as 'a sort of decomposing emblem which passes in and out of the iconic...the realms beyond

the senses, realms located in absence and death (Ronk 1994: 37)'. The same could be said of the character 'Marthe' created by the Bonnard literature.

Showalter notes that the image of Ophelia became a popular visual representation of the hysteric stereotype. She refers to the iconography of early psychiatry, particularly the photography of Jean-Martin Charcot. In the medical confusion regarding female 'neuroses' during the late nineteenth century, the 'hysteric' was frequently styled as Ophelia. Tying Marthe to the Ophelia image is made more pernicious through this implicit association with mental illness. The Marthe narrative is built upon the supposition of her physical and psychological failings. Tamar Garb lists the ways in which she has been historically pathologised by commentators:

Variously attributed with asthma, tuberculosis, neurasthenia, neurosis, obsessional cleanliness, or just feminine perversity, the mysterious cause of Marthe's immersions has fuelled Bonnard literature. (Garb 1998: 36)

There are no medical records in the public domain which might support the various hypotheses relating to Marthe's physical and mental health. Instead Bonnard historians rely upon anecdotal evidence given by patrons, fellow artists and Bonnard's family describing her as neurotic. To contextualize their accounts of Marthe's mental health it is important to remember that in the early development of psychology there was no clinical acknowledgement of the embodied female experience from puberty to menopause and into old age. In the psychosocial world of Marthe's era it was still believed that the uterus predisposed women to hysteria. The historical understanding of neurotic behaviour was inherently gendered where 'mental health is characterized in terms of mental ill-health which in turn is characterized in terms of 'feminine' traits and behaviour; the irrational, emotional, and of course typically, hysterical (Davidson 2003: 27)'. In the early twentieth century psychiatric treatment for neuroses could mean electro-shock therapy, genital mutilation and lobotomy. Any woman who fell short of a limited and limiting image of femininity – virtuous, submissive, maternal – was potentially under suspicion. When Marthe met Bonnard she was a working shop girl. Their marriage was childless. Both these facts would have challenged the social regulations imposed upon the bourgeois woman. Marthe was regarded by Bonnard's peers with such distrust that Arthur Hahnloser, an ophthalmologist and wealthy patron 'attempted to arrange for medical intervention (Hahnloser-Ingold 2016 p.283)'.

Hahnloser's attitude to Marthe is documented in partial notes left by his wife Hedy between the late 1920s and early 1930s.

We sometimes went to (Bonnard's) studio right after lunch, while Marthe was having her afternoon nap. (Bonnard) would urge us to talk softly 'so as not to wake her'. My husband tried to persuade him to seek treatment for her but without success.
(Hahnloser-Ingold 2016: 280)

This undated extract is striking in its documentation of the alarming marginalisation of Marthe by Bonnard's patrons - and his protection of her.

Bonnard makes reference to Marthe's difficulties in her later life when writing to George Besson in 1930, 'Marthe has become completely unsociable and I have to avoid any kind of gathering (Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco 2016: 316)'. It is important to note that Bonnard himself continued to travel freely and regularly around France to paint and to visit patrons, artists and family until the Second World War curtailed such trips. However it would seem that from her sixties onwards, and apparently suffering poor physical health, Marthe preferred to remain undisturbed at Le Cannet. She died in 1942 and the extent of Bonnard's feelings for his partner of almost 50 years was apparent in a letter to the Hahnloser's:

You understand the full extent of my sorrow (...) Marthe suffered a great deal for a month, with almost all her organs affected; an episode of heart failure took her away before me, apparently without her being aware of it (...) After long days of painful loneliness (...) I am preparing to return to Paris where I will be closer to my family. I can't stay on alone here (Hahnloser-Ingold 2016: 284)

If Marthe's final years were marked by deteriorating health it is perhaps not surprising that she was unable or unwilling to play the part of the boho-bourgeois hostess any more. Crucially, it was a role she may never have felt comfortable in. Watkins notes that Marthe 'came from a different class, which was difficult for Bonnard's family to accept and put off his friends (Watkins 1994: 36)'. Such class biases are another important means of contextualising her reluctance to socialise in later life. However the mythology of Marthe persists because it drives the dramatization of Bonnard's domestic interiors.

Conclusion

In sensationalizing the Pierre/Marthe relationship the existing literature at times builds a motive for murder to explain the corpse in the bath. Linda Nochlin writes

It is significant that Bonnard's work is at its most provocative when he kills off or mutilates his subject: Marthe dismembered or floating in death-like passivity is the heroine of his most exciting canvases. Did he love her or hate her, or, as is so often the case, feel some combination of both? (Nochlin 1998 p.30)

This interpretation is reiterated in the 2016 catalogue:

We must account for the self-denial involved in devoting oneself to painting the same woman for an entire lifetime...If Bonnard's nudes look peeled, scraped, excoriated as if skinned alive...it is because their presence bars any Apollonian dreams of happiness. (Comar 2016 p.145)

The modernist assumption underpinning the genre of the bather is (hetero) sexual desire. Where Marthe is not depicted as an object of sexual desire, she is effectively dead in heteronormative modernist terms. The canon kills her. However Bonnard's bath series and late interiors offer a valuable case study in unravelling the complications within modernism's relationship to the feminine and the domestic. They offer something more than the typical binary dichotomy between the 'masculine' and the 'feminine'. Yet the existing literature reiterates gender stereotypes to position Marthe as a vehicle to excuse Bonnard's difference rather than embrace it. The mythology of Marthe operates to reinforce the 'inside/outside opposition' (Pollock 1999: 6) of canonical structures. The irony is that those writers who are attempting to rehabilitate Bonnard's reputation are utilising an anachronistic, patriarchal value system within which he will always be deemed a failure – forever positioned on the outside.

Bonnard's contribution to the canon is the expansion of our understanding of modernism and our realisation that difference has always been an integral component. A work such as *The Bath* reveals the ambiguity and polysemy which occurred within the modernist era. The gender problematic of the painting reveals the fallacy of a single overarching aesthetic narrative. In Bonnard's art a man does not have to be virile and dominant; a woman does not have to be sexual and passive; the domestic interior is not the naturalized site of the female and an unnatural space for the male. In removing the mythology of Marthe these possibilities are made visible.

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